

A STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS 1:20-26

by William M. Wachtel

This text is often used to support the idea that the Apostle Paul wished to die so that he could go immediately to heaven and be with Christ. It is thought to be a “difficult text” for those who believe the Bible teaches that the dead are asleep and do not get to be with Christ until the time of the resurrection at His coming.

The claim of some that Paul wished to go to heaven at death represents him as faced with one of two choices: life or death. The latter event, as they see it, would enable him “to depart and be with Christ” (verse 23). Yet, when all of Paul’s teachings about the future life are studied and compared, a serious question arises as to this popular interpretation of what Paul says here.

Why, for instance, did he teach in 1 Thessalonians 4 that the way Christians get to “be with the Lord” (verse 17) is by being resurrected at His “coming” (verse 15) and by being caught up to meet Him *after* He descends from heaven (verses 16 and 17)? There is nothing here about going to be with the Lord when one dies, or about individuals passing *one by one* into the heavens whenever they die. No, Paul describes the gathering of an entire group *at one time* into the presence of the Savior, and *that* to take place at His return! It will be a grand and glorious reunion of *all* the faithful from both Old and New Testament ages—the “better thing” to which the writer of Hebrews looked forward (11:39,40).

The same scenario is depicted in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul declares that the resurrection of the dead in Christ occurs “at his coming” (verse 23). It is stated that meanwhile the dead have “fallen asleep” (verses 18,20,51). Christ Himself is said to have slept in death, being the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (verse 20). The passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 also describes the dead in Christ as “those who have fallen asleep” (verses 13,14,15). Nothing in either passage implies that the dead are conscious or that they are alive “with Christ” during a supposed “intermediate state” between death and resurrection.

Are we to believe, then, that Paul contradicts himself in Philippians 1:20-26, or that he had received “further light” on the state of the dead by the time he wrote this letter? Some writers have so stated or suggested. It seems strange, however, to seek to harmonize Paul’s writings by such interpretations. Rather, it would seem wiser to ask whether the apparently

conflicting ideas can in fact be found to fit together in a consistent and harmonious manner!

When we examine the text in Philippians we discover, for example, that Paul really is not saying that he does not “know” whether he would choose life or death. Most of our English versions render the Greek word used here (*gnorizo*) as “know” or some synonym meaning the same. But if *gnorizo* means “know” here, *it is the only instance in the entire New Testament where it is so translated!* This verb occurs 25 times in the New Testament, and in every other text it is translated “to make known” or “to declare.” Moulton and Milligan’s standard work, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, assesses the meaning and usage of this word in the Koine Greek papyri and states that “it has definitely the meaning ‘make known’ as in all its NT occurrences (even Phil. 1:22)” (page 129).

This ought to alert us to the fact that something questionable may be going on in the minds of translators who render *gnorizo* as “know” instead of “make known” or “declare.” Is it because this verb cannot bear its regular meaning here, or because those translators are imposing a view of their own on what Paul is saying? Are we to assume that Paul does not know which of the two choices he would make, or rather that he does not tell his readers which choice he would prefer?

As a matter of fact, he does tell them quite clearly what he *wants*: “to depart and be with Christ.” But he has already stated that he does not declare which of *two* specific alternatives he would choose—whether to keep on living or to die. Either of these two would involve certain advantages and disadvantages for him and for his readers.

If he were to keep on living, this would mean “fruitful labor” (v.22 NIV) for him and would result in “progress and joy in the faith” (v.25) for his readers. It would also allow Paul to exalt Christ in whatever circumstances his life would bring (v.20). If, on the other hand, he were to die, his martyrdom would exalt Christ. His faithfulness unto death would gain him a martyr’s crown (Rev. 2:10) in the day when crowns are awarded (2 Tim. 4:8). His example as a martyr would strengthen other Christians to be faithful despite persecution and martyrdom. For Paul’s readers, the disadvantage of his death would be their losing him and his continued ministry.

This brings us to the fact that Paul does describe what is his *real* desire, which we find to be a *third* alternative: “to depart and be with Christ.” Paul says that this “is better by far” (v.23 NIV). At this point he piles on superlatives to express how much more he desires this third alternative. It is better than any two other choices because it is the *best of*

all! He has already told us that he will not declare whether he would choose death or mortal life. If “to die” means that he then, by means of death, gets to depart and be with Christ, he has obviously told us what he said *he would not tell us!* Can we believe that Paul has contradicted himself within two adjoining verses (22 and 23)?

In verse 23 Paul says he is “pressed out” by the two things he has already mentioned—to live or to die. Arndt and Gingrich translate: “I am hard pressed (to choose) between the two” (page 797). It is in the sentence just preceding this statement that he says, “And what I shall choose I do not make known.” We must conclude, therefore, that when he says he wants to depart and be with Christ he is *not* saying that he wants to die in order that he may so depart!

What, then, is he really saying? Paul had already written that at Christ’s coming, when He descends from heaven, the resurrected and glorified saints will, in fact, *depart* (from the surface of the earth) to “meet the Lord *in the air*” (1 Thess. 4:17). They will be “caught up” or “snatched away” (Greek, *harpazo*) in the clouds, for the grand and glorious reunion with their Lord—and “so” (Greek, *houtos*, “by such means”) be forever “with the Lord.” (When the Spirit of the Lord “suddenly took Philip away”—Acts 8:39, Greek, *harpazo*—Philip *departed* from the presence of the Ethiopian eunuch and was taken to another location!

Paul consistently magnifies the resurrection of believers at the return of Christ as the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13) to be held before their eyes. He never exalts *death* (it is an *enemy!*—1 Cor. 15:26) nor does he imply that it is a means by which to enter into Christ’s presence! Philippians 1:20-26 is wrongly so interpreted—yielding a contradiction within the text itself and a clash with Paul’s own teachings elsewhere!

The End